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AUTHOR Green, Robert L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of athletics at most colleges and universities, but in particular at the historically black colleges and universities. The paper notes the power of athletic events to bring together the nation and even the globe and the leading role of the athletic community internationally and athletes individually in taking stands against South Africa or effecting changes in social and racial relations. The paper points out the influence of black achievements in sports on the African American community and goes on to examine the role of college athletics in U.S. society. Many leaders from the African American community have benefitted from involvement in sports programs at the collegiate level. A conclusion calls on schools to remember the value of athletics programs in college and makes the following four recommendations for historically black colleges: (1) maintain programs that develop individuals who are skilled and concerned with the advancement of society; (2) use athletics to unify the university; (3) use revenues from sports to develop programs in sports typically not accessible to African Americans (e.g., golf and tennis); and (4) use the popularity of athletics to promote the name and prestige of historically black colleges so as to attract high quality students. Included are 11 references. (JB)

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THE PROGRESSIVE ROLE OF ATHLETICS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Prepared for the President's Office
Central State University

by

Robert L. Green, Ph.D.
Director of the Center for Applied Research
and the
Martin Luther King, Jr. Institute on Human Relations
Cuyahoga Community College
Cleveland, Ohio

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INTRODUCTION

Athletics and sports events have become an increasingly more important feature of our everyday lives. Whether we talk about the many people who are taking up exercise to extend the years of a healthy, active life or whether we talk about formally organized athletic programs at the collegiate and professional levels, there are greater and greater numbers of people who directly or indirectly are affected by or are participating in some form of athletics. And every indication suggests that in the next seven to ten years we will see a continuous growth in the impact athletics has on our society. Active corporate sponsorship and promotion, the general concern for physical fitness, the ever-expanding coverage of sports by print and electronic media--these are some of the principal reasons why the impact of athletics will in all likelihood be even greater in the coming years.

Because of their roles as teachers and trainers, colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to capitalize on the broad interest in athletics. Colleges and universities can structure their athletic programs to include training programs that will produce greater numbers of well-educated athletes, athletes who are prepared for and aware of economic opportunities beyond the playing field, athletes who will be concerned about and involved in their respective communities. These kinds of possibilities and opportunities are especially important for black colleges and universities because of the particularly prominent status athletics has in the African-American community.

This long-established and nearly universal significance of sports for African-Americans, both culturally and politically, in large part explains why athletics has traditionally been an important institutional component at historically black colleges. As will be demonstrated in this discussion, athletics plays a major role at most colleges and universities, but this role has had and continues to have a more heightened importance at black colleges and universities.

For more than one hundred years Central State University "has successfully molded the lives and destinies of thousands of industrious, talented men and women." (Goggins, 1987) One important part of Central States' outstanding tradition as an institution of higher learning has been its traditionally strong support of its athletic programs. This support of athletic excellence is of course not unique to Central State nor to other historically black colleges. For wherever we may choose to look, whether we refer to Stanford or Harvard, the University of Minnesota or Morgan State University, we will find that athletic programs are an integral component in the overall structure and character of our nation's colleges and universities. As Smith notes, "...nearly every important institution of higher education in America has at some point in its history emphasized ...intercollegiate athletics." (Smith, 1988)

This emphasis and support of athletics is not hard to understand. Perhaps no other activity or institution in this country brings together as many different people as sports does. The Super Bowl, to cite just one instance, provides a vivid illustration of this fact. Starting out as a game of interest primarily to the typical football fan, the Super Bowl has now become virtually an unofficial national holiday that provides an occasion for families and friends, for blacks and whites, for men and women, for peoples of all kind to socialize and share laughter and good times. This year nearly forty million people in America, 62% of the viewing audience, watched the New York Giants defeat the Buffalo Bills. And this number does not include the probable tens of millions of out-of-home viewers of the game. (Broadcasting, 1991) And this sense of a shared experience goes far beyond the national borders of the United States. The Super Bowl is annually one of the most watched events in all the world.

Similarly, but more formally, the International Olympic games provide the setting for a genuine coming together of the community of nations.

Indeed it would be difficult to point out any other event or situation in which we see greater instances of good will among peoples of different colors, creeds, and nations than the many expressions of brotherhood and sisterhood we see every four years at the Olympic games. Where else would we see people from the United States and the Soviet Union or people from opposing political and ethnic camps regularly shaking hands and embracing one another in congratulations? These examples of international friendship are representative of what we would like to see, but rarely do, in the economic and political international community.

And it is precisely because of the symbolic cultural and political significance of athletics that nations are willing to devote the kind of time and resources they do in the development of their sports programs. It is hardly surprising that each Olympic year the two traditional superpowers, the U. S. and the Soviet Union, regularly engage in a hard-fought contest to see who will go home with the most gold medals.

AFRICAN-AMERICANS, ATHLETICS, AND POLITICAL CHANGE

It was with regard to the social and political implications of athletics that the long-time civil rights activist and currently the Director of the Center for Applied Research at Cuyahoga Community College, Robert L. Green, traveled with the former Mayor of Atlanta, Andrew Young, and Arthur Ashe to South Africa in 1975. In addition to their call for broad social change and for equality of treatment and opportunity for black South Africans, they also pressed for the legal integration of South Africa's sports teams. All three felt certain that the breakdown of apartheid in this important area would lead to more wholesale changes

in the entire South African system. In this same respect, it should be kept in mind that it was the international athletic community that took sanctions against South Africa's racist regime long before the United Sates government took strong legal action to end apartheid. It was also in the international sports arena that more than half a century ago Jesse Owens made a mockery of Hitler and his racist theories about the natural superiority of the so-called Aryan races.

Of course the victories of Cleveland's own Jesse Owens are part of a long line of black athletic triumphs that have had a significant effect on social and racial relations. It was in 1909, when Jack Johnson won the heavyweight boxing title that the phrase "the great white hope" was born. (Henderson, 1969) Probably from that time until the very present day, in one way or another, athletics has been one important index of racial relations and racial attitudes in this country. And just as important, victories on the athletic field have contributed to the general quest of African-Americans to achieve full equality.

On the one hand, while blacks could point with pride to the achievements of Jesse Owens in track and to the triumphs of Joe Louis in the ring, on the other hand many of these same blacks (and their white sympathizers) were rightly demanding that blacks be given similar kinds of opportunities to excel in the fields of education, housing, politics, and economics. It is not too much to say that the athletic accomplishments of Owens, Louis, and others in the 30s and 40s were part and parcel of the protest movements for equality, led by such men and women as A. Phillip Randolph, Mary McLeod Bethune, W. E. B. DuBois, and Walter White. And surely there was some connection between the role hundreds of thousands of black troops played (virtually all these troops, by the way, were in segregated units) in defeating Hitler's racist, fascist dictatorship and the subsequent entry

of Jackie Robinson as the first black major league baseball player in 1946. In fact, the evidence shows that after World War II blacks were "growing tired of their separate-but-equal status," and part of their demand for equality was the insistence on equal treatment in professional athletics. Not only baseball but basketball too was made an integrated sport in the early postwar years. (Hickok, 1977; Ashe, 1988)

In 1968 black football players at Michigan State University in East Lansing boycotted part of spring football practice to call attention to what they felt was the discriminating treatment they received in both the athletic and academic arenas. They called in Green to help them negotiate their demands, and for a while it appeared as if improvements would be implemented. Over the next few years, however, conditions for blacks actually worsened. So much so that by 1972 Green, who had by this time become the Dean of the College of Urban Development at MSU, along with two of his black colleagues directed a research report entitled The Status of Blacks in the Big Ten Athletic Conference: Issues and Concerns (Green, et al, 1972).

The revelations and findings of this report led to what could be correctly termed a summit with the Big Ten Commissioner Wayne Duke. As a result of this meeting and further negotiations, the first black official in the Big Ten was hired. The first black to work in the Big Ten Commissioner's office was also hired as a result of these negotiations. Another significant consequence of this protest by black educators and athletes was that Michigan State University was the first major university in the country to establish a well-organized formal counseling program designed to ensure higher graduation rates for black athletes. This program was soon expanded to provide support for all athletes, black and white.

In making reference to consequences beyond the playing field, it must be noted that another fundamentally important result of the athletes'

protest and demands was that a concerted effort was begun throughout the Big Ten universities to hire blacks as support staff, as maintenance staff, as counselors, as coaches and assistant coaches, and in various other administrative and academic positions in which few if any blacks had been employed in these universities.

This examination of the socially progressive role of athletics brings to mind two other collegiate athletes who in the 60s strikingly dramatized the militant protest of African-Americans against the oppression faced here at home. When Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their clenched fists on the victory stand at the 1968 Olympics, they symbolized for all the world to see the plight and the protest of African-Americans. As Arthur Ashe rightly points out, "Evans and Carlos' gesture at the '68 Olympics would forever change the image of the black American athlete" (Ashe, 1988). In this same context we shouldn't forget the heroic stand that Muhammed Ali took against the Vietnam War. In fact, Muhammed Ali and Martin Luther King, Jr. were the first two blacks of national stature to speak out against America's role in that war. Both of these men paid a heavy price for their convictions and their courage (Edwards, 1969; Garrow, 1986).

And one of the reasons black athletes hold such a high place in the black community is precisely because of athletes like Muhammad Ali, who are willing to speak out. Throughout the world, any accomplished athlete is held in admiration in his or her community, but the African-American athlete typically has the additional responsibility of representing a people. Some, of course, are unwilling to accept this role. But numerous others, such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell, Wilma Rudolph, and Doug Williams, are readily willing to use their status as a platform to advance the cause of their community.

Because of this increased social awareness a new black athlete has emerged in the last fifteen to twenty years. More modern black athletes have taken advantage of their collegiate athletic years and are better educated and more articulate than many of the African-American athletes of years past. When someone like James Worthy, Cheryl Miller, Isaiah Thomas, Warren Moon, or David Winfield gets in front of a microphone, they are able to express themselves with clarity and conciseness.

Often, too, this new black athlete is more socially conscious and more committed to improving the lives of the youth and others less fortunate in the community. Alan Page's youth foundation is an example of this kind of involvement, as is Dave Winfield's work with the youth in the same city where he plays baseball.

Probably the prototype for this new black athlete is Julius Erving. One of the best players in basketball, Dr. J. was also one of the game's best spokesmen. Dignified and articulate, Dr. J. has been able to use his earnings and his success on the court to become the owner of several businesses. Besides these entrepreneurial ventures, Dr. J. spends a considerable amount of time working with youth to encourage them to lead more productive lives.

Undoubtedly, though, the most celebrated instance in recent times of an athlete's or former athlete's social involvement and commitment is that of Bill and Camille Cosby's donation to Spelman College. The TV star and former track man gave twenty million dollars to this African-American women's school, his wife's alma mater. Central State, too, is familiar with Bill and Camille Cosby's generosity. Because of his relationship with President Thomas, Cosby has donated close to a million dollars to Central State University for athletic and academic development, and on one of the Cosby shows made a favorable mention of the school (Goggins, 1987). It should be noted that like Dr. J., and like Bill Cosby, Central State University is

committed to promoting and developing athletic programs and athletes with this same kind of social consciousness and concern for the community's welfare that these men and the other men and women mentioned exhibit.

Of course translating athletic achievements into success in other areas is not limited to black athletes. Certainly Jack Kemp, the current Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, used his success as an all-star quarterback for the Buffalo Bills to build his political career. Similarly, Bill Bradley has built on his years as an All-American guard at Princeton and as a star with the New York Knicks to become a New Jersey Senator.

ATHLETICS AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY

These various sports stars have been able to benefit so much from their careers because athletics is an important aspect of life at every level of our society. But sports and sports programs have an even greater importance to the African-American community. One very practical reason for this is that games such as football, baseball, and basketball are relatively inexpensive to organize but can still provide an important outlet for exercise and recreation. Poverty is another reason why these kinds of games mean so much more to the black community. It is not often you will find many tennis courts, swimming pools, sailing facilities, riding paths, or golf courses in poorer communities. Consequently, we see a greater concentration of African-Americans in those sports with very low overhead. One approach that schools such as Central State and others might consider is to apportion a part of the revenues from football and basketball to support a greater involvement of blacks in these more costly sports, such as golf and tennis.

Despite the relatively low costs of sports such as basketball, the continuous cry in African-American communities across the nation is

for more recreational facilities. And for good reason. These black mothers and fathers know that organized athletics can be a socially beneficial means for their sons and daughters to use their bodies and use up some of the excess physical and psychic energy that is a part of the growing adolescent years. The idea can sometimes become a cliche, but there are nevertheless legitimate grounds for the belief that athletics can contribute to the socialization process - teaching young people about teamwork, about winning and losing with character and about responsibility. And hopefully these lessons will spill over into everyday life, so that a youth will be less likely to join a gang, or use drugs, or be less likely to become involved in teenaged pregnancy. There is still much to be said about the complementary relationship between a healthy mind and a healthy body.

The point can be and perhaps has been overemphasized but nonetheless it would be hard to deny that the potential financial rewards and prestige are another part of why athletics are looked upon with such favor in African-American communities. Historically, and even to the present-day, athletics has provided blacks relatively greater opportunities than those available in the larger society. And well-known African-American athletes are treated by the larger society with the kind of dignity and respect the average person, and especially a black person, rarely if ever receives. And the fact shouldn't be overlooked that the media outlets are often far more willing to interview and get the opinions of black athletes, amateur and professional, then they are to get the opinions of traditional black social and political leaders. This is another reason for the enhanced status of the athlete in the black community.

But in addition to the money and media attention, it is also true that the accomplishments of black athletes are looked upon as part of the overall struggle of African-Americans to break down barriers. When

Arthur Ashe wins a Wimbledon or Doug Williams brilliantly quarterbacks a Super Bowl victory, young blacks rightly think, well if they did it in sports, I can go on to similarly high achievements in medicine, or engineering, or start my own business or become the head of one of America's large corporations, the way Reginald Lewis has at Beatrice Foods. So here again, we see an important connection between athletics and the community.

COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

Although the focus has been on the African-American community, few would argue that athletics is an integral part of our entire society. It tells us something about the degree to which the majority of people identify with athletics when you consider that on college and university campuses across the nation students are typically referred to not by their schools' names but by the athletic teams' mascots. So we have students calling themselves Buckeyes or Spartans, or Marauders, as often as they would say they're alumni of Ohio State, Michigan State, or Central State.

Probably the central social event each year on college campuses is Homecoming Day. And Homecoming is almost always organized around the "big game." And not just on Homecoming day, but athletics forms a significant part of campus social life throughout the year. Sports, as noted earlier, cuts across lines of race, religion, sex, and politics, so people of all types and persuasions can come together to cheer the team on to victory. The athletic events provide the occasion for people to forget about their worries for a few hours and have some carefree fun. As Ross states, "There is, in sport, some of the rudimentary drama found in popular theater... And common to watching both activities is the sense of participation in a shared tradition and in shared fantasies." (Ross, 1973)

These are the reasons that schools have no trouble filling their stadiums and field houses every weekend with tens of thousands of fans. And this is why, too, the television networks are willing to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to college athletic conferences. The fact that the networks would pay this kind of money shows that college sports holds a prominent place in our society, one that reaches far beyond the college campus.

We can look at it from any number of different ways, but it is undeniable that there is something special about college athletics. There is a certain atmosphere, a certain intensity and enthusiasm that you find at no other level of sports. It probably goes all the way back to the Greek ideal of the amateur athlete striving to excel, and no doubt this ideal is an aspect of the strong hold that amateur athletics has on the emotions of American society.

In making reference to the ideal of the amateur athlete, acknowledgment must be made to the all too widespread problem of college athletes, and especially black athletes, not graduating or graduating without receiving a substantive education. This is an area that directly and indirectly people such as Green and President Thomas have been involved in for the last 25 years or so. When Green and his colleagues did the research on African-American athletes and had their meeting with Commissioner Duke, their major focus was on establishing programs to ensure that a greater percentage of black athletes did get a quality education and did go on to graduate. The findings of their first well-organized research in 1972 pointed to the same kinds of problems identified in the recent Knight Foundation's Commission report. There is nearly universal agreement that the practice of channeling athletes into make-work courses must cease; that mechanisms must be set up to increase the rate of graduation of all athletes; that coaches and athletic administrations and university

presidents must be held responsible and accountable for the educational progress of the athletes. These and similar recommendations of the Knight Foundation's Commission report deserve the wholehearted endorsement of all college educators, administrators, and athletic personnel.

On the other hand, those involved in and concerned about athletics must be careful not to go to the other extreme and begin making sweeping condemnations of collegiate athletics. Far too much good has been achieved to do that. For example, during this year's NCAA basketball tournament, the network at one of the half times did a special on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Texas El Paso victory over the University of Kentucky in 1966. The lasting significance of that game was that a predominantly white Southern university started all blacks on its basketball team. This fact and the fact that Texas El Paso beat the all-white Kentucky team played an important part in the eventual integration of sports in the South. This was only one of many, many instances that show that "there is a significant correlation between sports and social reform movements." (Porter, 1987)

It should also be remembered that colleges and universities have traditionally been far more democratic in their sports programs than have professional sports. It's been in college sports that African-Americans have been able to play in positions and sports that have been historically reserved for whites, like quarterback, and pitcher, and linebacker. And in sports like tennis and golf.

Historically black colleges in particular have served as the nurturing and proving grounds for some of the greatest players ever to compete in professional sports. Of course, Grambling is the most outstanding example of a black college producing stellar athletes. But what is not

as well known is that Grambling places great stress on producing scholar-athletes. Education is not sacrificed to athletics. Like Central State, Grambling is committed to high achievement in both academics and athletics.

All athletic programs, however, might benefit from having some form of an in-service program for athletes to ensure that these young men and women keep their sports activities in perspective and at the same time develop a basic social awareness. While these athletes are preparing their sports skills, they should also be better preparing themselves for the ultimate roles they will play in society.

Yes, there are serious imbalances that need to be corrected in collegiate athletic programs. But while we are going about the necessary work of reform we should be careful not to overlook the enduring accomplishments of collegiate sports and the many outstanding individuals who have benefited from and been products of these athletic programs. This history of athletic accomplishments is recognized right here at Central State in the school's naming of one of its building after the great Paul Robeson, one of our finest examples of an African-American student-athlete.

So while we are engaging in the justified criticisms of college sports programs, let's not forget that without the benefit of these programs it is unlikely that Reggie Jackson would be the polished announcer that he is in the baseball broadcasting booth, nor would be O. J. Simpson in football. Alan Page wouldn't be the top flight attorney that he is today without the collegiate athletic program. Nor would Michael Jordan be the well-spoken young man he is without the benefit of his collegiate athletic years.

LEADERSHIP AND ATHLETICS

Another point not often noted in discussions of sports is the long, illustrious line of African-American educators, business executives, social and political leaders who at one time or another participated in athletics. As noted earlier, the great actor, political activist, and Rhodes Scholar Paul Robeson was an all-American football player at Rutgers University in 1917-18. The late Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor, ran track and boxed in college. Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta and the co-chair of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic games, was a skilled collegiate athlete. Similarly, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, unquestionably one of our foremost leaders and the first African-American to be a serious candidate for the presidency, was a letter winner in football, baseball, and basketball in high school and a star quarterback in college.

A number of black college presidents have benefited from and enjoyed participating in athletics in high school and in college. Central State's own President Arthur Thomas participated in track and football in high school and then participated in track in college. Dr. John Porter, the first black state superintendent of schools in Michigan, a former president of Eastern Michigan University, and the current Superintendent of public schools in Detroit - was an outstanding basketball player in high school and college. Dr. Willie Herenton, the Superintendent of schools in Memphis, was a basketball star and boxing champion in college.

The list of African-American business, educational, political and social leaders who have participated in athletics and made it a part of their academic and adult success could be extended indefinitely. These few examples cited should therefore be viewed as representative of the tens

of thousands of successful African-American men and women who have found athletics to be a beneficial and important supplement in the attainment of their academic and professional goals. Although it is frequently overlooked, athletics and the experiences gained in athletic competition, particularly those experiences that promote leadership skills, have made and continue to make valuable contributions to the development of the careers of successful African-Americans in all realms of life at both the local and national levels.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion let it be said that while we must work to eliminate the shortcomings and excesses in sports programs, we must be equally conscious of the valuable contributions collegiate athletic programs have made to innumerable individuals as well as its contributions to social progress in society at large.

Collegiate athletics has been and will continue to be a major force in college and university life. Therefore, it is incumbent upon collegiate leaders, from the board of trustees to the president and throughout the entire administration, to work to ensure that athletic success is augmented by academic excellence.

The cooperation and participation of college faculty are crucial if athletic programs and academic excellence are to complement each other. Rather than viewing athletics as being in opposition to academics, college faculty should see in these programs an excellent opportunity to equip with the appropriate social and academic skills many of tomorrow's leaders and decision makers. In addition to the general appeal and influence of sports, the opportunity to mold the future is another important reason why college faculty should rally behind the administration to support athletic programs. On the other hand, those faculty members who refuse to see any merit in college athletics and instead maintain an unyielding, negative attitude towards such programs will find themselves in opposition with the core values and the basic philosophy of the institution. And not only with the institution, but such faculty members will also find themselves in opposition with the great majority of the university community.

Given the practical, educative aspect of athletics, given athletics widespread popularity, and given the highly prominent status that

athletics has in the black community, it is recommended that historically black colleges:

1. Maintain and expand athletic programs that develop men and women who are skilled and accomplished scholars/athletes who are concerned about the betterment of society.

2. Utilize athletics as one of the unifying elements in defining and promoting the university's character, its spirit, and its identity.

3. Utilize revenues from successful athletic programs to establish sports programs in those areas typically not accessible to African-Americans, such as golf, swimming, and tennis. By this means larger segments of the university community will have an opportunity to participate in athletics.

4. Build on the popularity of athletics to promote the name and prestige of historically black colleges and universities and, thereby, attract high quality students for all academic programs.

Finally, if athletics is viewed in the proper perspective, then sports programs can be a complement to the University's overall mission. There would then be the essential harmony that should exist between athletic and academic programs.

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